

Across the Bridge: The Merrimack Undergraduate Research Journal

Volume 1

Article 4

2019

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Recommended Citation

Levine, Mary (2019) "Herbert Hoover and the Problem of American Indians," *Across the Bridge: The Merrimack Undergraduate Research Journal*: Vol. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/atb/vol1/iss1/4>

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Herbert Hoover and the Problem of American Indians

Mary Levine

Abstract

In the 1930s, federal American Indian policy shifted dramatically away from seeking to end all tribes and break up reservation lands. The shift towards re-recognizing American Indian Native nations as enduring political entities is often characterized as beginning under President Roosevelt and with the guidance of John Collier. In fact, it was Roosevelt's predecessor, Herbert Hoover, who gave attention to and laid the foundation for this profound shift in federal Indian policy. This paper presents the historical evidence of Hoover's deeply held interest in American Indian affairs and the consequences of this interest. Hoover began his term as president with great concern for American Indians. President Hoover's vice president, Charles Curtis, was the first (and only) Vice President of American Indian descent. Hoover prioritized attention to American Indian issues. Hoover advocated for self-determination for American Indians, especially in regards to educational and financial stability. Due to these factors along with many more, President Hoover instigated a variety of changes for American Indians. This paper investigates Hoover's public statements, policies enacted during his presidency, and information from his memoirs and writings to offer evidence for Hoover's essential role in creating the foundations for the redirection of federal American Indian policy.

Keywords: *Herbert Hoover, Native Americans, Presidencies, History, Policy*

Throughout history, some officials have been acknowledged for their impact with policy change on Native Americans. This acknowledgment, however, has often credited very few presidents and officials. Some of these officials include Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Collier. FDR and Collier are often recognized as key figures in the change for American Indians, but it is evident that there are other officials that instigated this change. The most notable of these officials is Herbert Hoover. Hoover, with his unique background in Indian lifestyle, took office hoping to create some sort of change for the American Indians. Coming in to office immediately following the Meriam Report allowed for Hoover's to be the first administration that understood and acted on federal Indian policy. Also, Hoover was the first president who ever advocated for self-determination over the assimilation of the American Indians. Hoover's predecessors often

enacted policies that forced the assimilation of American Indians, but Hoover recognized the harm in assimilating Indians. The idea of assimilation remained strong all throughout history, allowing every president after Hoover to think of American Indians in a new way. This was inherently important for improving federal policies for American Indians, as it set the tone for future policy. Also, a new thought process helped to amend current policies that pushed for assimilation. Overall, Hoover introduced an important idea to federal officials, allowing American Indians a more promising future.

Relevant American Indian History

Between 1830 and 1849, many Americans viewed American Indians as objects and hoped to remove Indians from the Western land. As the United States began expanding to the West, many Americans found that Indians had lived there. This prompted Congress to pass the Indian Removal Act in 1830. The Indian Removal Act had Indians removed to federal territory in order for Americans to take their land. This led to the Trail of Tears, in which the Cherokee tribe refused to move and were forced to. Many members of the tribe died during this forced removal, leaving a lasting impact. The Cherokee Trail of Tears was not a unique event, as it happened to many other tribes. In 1849, the government began making reservations for American Indians in order to decrease the number of deaths from removal. This continued in order for Americans to gain more territory out in the West, which lasted until the 1880s.¹

Prior to Hoover's inauguration, American Indians were viewed as a collective unit within politics. From the 1880s-1920s, the main goal of federal policy regarding American Indians was to assimilate them. During the early 1900s, the assimilation process had become quite coercive. To execute assimilation, there were a variety of steps taken by the federal government. This includes "replacing the traditional communal economic base with a system of private property; intensified education, primarily through boarding schools; the regulation of every aspect of Indian social life, including marriage, dispute settlement, and religious practice; the granting of citizenship;...and finally allowing the Indian tribes to become self-governing by adopting Constitutions ultimately subject to the approval of the U.S. government."²

¹ Jarratt-Snider, Karen. "Overview of Federal Indian Policy." Accessed May 10, 2018.

² Wilkins, David E. 2002. *American Indian politics and the American political system*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield. 116.

These policies were enacted in order for the federal government to have absolute rule over the Indians and their reservations. The most severe federal policy, however, was the land allotment system, which was under the General Allotment Act of 1887. This law was passed, as many federal legislatures at the time believed the only way to assimilate Indians into the American society was to break up their reservations into individual pieces of land. This new land given to the individual Indians was given in trust and had to be held for twenty-five years.³ The additional land that was not given to any Indian individual was given to the U.S. government. This allotment act allowed for either the U.S. government or the state government to take away and sell a vast majority of these Indian reservations, thus destroying the tribe as a whole. By the end of this allotment act, nearly ninety million acres of tribal land had been lost. Due to the harm the allotment act had done to American Indians, it was clear that the federal government needed to change.⁴

Moving forward, presidents beginning in the 1920s started to focus more on the self-determination of American Indians. Involvement in Indian affairs was not the main concern of many federal agencies, specifically Congress, but they began to focus on the relationship between Indian tribes and the U.S. government. All presidents, beginning with Hoover, emphasized concern about how involved the Office of Indian Affairs was in the tribal reservations. This caused much disturbance between the two groups, leading to many of the policy issues seen moving forward. These presidents also expressed a strong interest in focusing on the care and protection for American Indians.⁵ This essential switch from assimilation to self-determination began under Hoover and was pivotal in creating the policies and changes that American Indians required. The question of how Indians should govern was still difficult to answer, but the federal government became clear on the push for self-determination.

Officials that Made Change for Indians: Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Collier

Throughout history, there have been a few key officials responsible for making change for American Indians. This paper stresses the importance Hoover had on the necessary changes that needed to be made for American Indians. Some, however, believe that Hoover was not the first individual to enforce change for American Indians. Two officials that are often viewed as

³ An Indian land given in trust is land that is federally owned by the government. The beneficial interest, however, remains with the Indian and/or tribe.

⁴ Wilkins.

⁵ Trafzer, Clifford E. *American Indians/American Presidents: A History*. New York: Harper, 2009. 145.

important, however, are Franklin Delano Roosevelt and John Collier. Many important political figures offered change for American Indians, but Roosevelt and Collier were seen as the first to show a great deal of concern for this specific population. Because of this viewpoint, Roosevelt and Collier are often looked at as stepping stones for other political leaders, especially presidents.⁶

Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) served as the United States president from 1933 until his death in 1945. FDR was the longest serving president, as he was elected for four consecutive terms. He served as the 32nd president of the United States as a Democrat, and his term immediately followed The Great Depression.⁷ Because of the tragedy this made FDR a very popular president, which in turn allowed him to contribute to many groups and populations, especially the American Indians. Also, following the Great Depression made room for much change in the United States government. As a way to remedy what had happened during the Great Depression, FDR created the New Deal. The New Deal was a series of new policies that worked to recover and reform the government, as well as the people. The New Deal was a successful policy enacted by FDR, despite some controversy.

Immediately once in office, FDR felt a necessity to reform Indian policy. He was often encouraged and guided by John Collier, who had worked very closely with American Indians. His first change was to take the powers of the Board of Indian Commissioners and give it to the interior secretary. The purpose of this switch was to give the authority of Indian affairs to a more centralized unit, making it easier to enforce change. FDR then appointed John Collier, an American writer, to serve as the Commissioner for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He served as the Commissioner for the entirety of FDR's presidency, meaning he was a major advocate for all the changes that FDR got pushed through. During the New Deal, FDR and Collier created the Indian New Deal, a way in which the government could focus on Indian affairs while working with the U.S. on their New Deal.⁸ They passed the Wheeler-Howard Act in 1934. This act is also known as the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA). The IRA provided a series of important rights that were necessary for Native Americans. These rights include, but are not limited to, ending the allotment of tribal lands, prohibiting taking tribal lands away, allowing the addition of tribal lands, recognizing tribal governments and allowing tribes to have their own self-government, creating a

⁶ Philip, Kenneth R. "John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform: 1920-1954." (1977).

⁷ Philip, 81.

⁸ Trafzer, 154.

tribal development loan program, and establishing a “native-hire preference” for Bureau of Indian Affairs jobs.

Prior to the Indian Reorganization Act, Collier had first introduced what is known as the Collier Bill. The Collier Bill was a much more extensive and detailed outline of the specific relationship between the government and American Indians. This bill was forty-eight pages long and was separated into four titles. Each title described a major issue with American Indians at the time and how federal policy would change this relationship.

The first section was “Title I- Indian Self-Government.” This section outlined the importance of giving Indians the right to self-governance. It described the change in each federal policy that exerted any control over Indian governance and provided policies for this system. The second section was “Title II- Special Education for Indians.” This section was the shortest and least controversial, as it described the emphasis on fixing Indian educational systems. It also explained the need for training for young Indians on how to work in American governmental systems. The third section was “Title III- Indian Lands.” This section outlined the reversal in the allotment policy, in which all land needed to be given back to the Indians. This section proved to be very controversial among Indians and Congress, as it described the policy changes regarding the land allotment policy. The last section was “Title IV- Court of Indian Affairs.” This section described the difficulties with the Indian justice system, and emphasized the need for American Indians to be a part of the regular justice system. It outlined the changes that would need to be made to the judiciary in order for American Indians to become a part of the system. This bill, while very detailed, was difficult for Congress to pass. Some of the policies were enacted through the Indian Reorganization Act, but many were disregarded.⁹

Collier was the main organizer behind the Indian New Deal, as he wanted to end the assimilation of Native Americans into European and American culture.¹⁰ John Collier had always had a particular interest in the Native Americans, especially after his visit to Taos, New Mexico. While in New Mexico, he encountered a group of Indians called the “Red Atlantis.” The Red Atlantis lived in a society in which they were able to practice their traditional values, while also meeting the governmental needs of the group. He brought these ideas back to his job as

⁹ Deloria, Vine, and Clifford M. Lytle. *The nations within: The past and future of American Indian sovereignty*. University of Texas Press, 1984.

¹⁰ “Indian New Deal.” National Archives and Records Administration. Accessed May 10, 2018.

Commissioner, and while many radical ideas failed, the IRA did not. John Collier revolved his entire life around working for the benefit of Native Americans.

Collier emphasized, when passing the IRA, that the allotment of land for Native Americans had gone from 113,000,000 acres to only 47,000,000. Collier also obtained \$3,600,000 of Public Works Adjustment money, and he used this to create an Indian Day School and stop the sale of Indian lands. Collier also noted the importance of letting the Indians self-govern their own tribes. By letting them have control of their land as well as keep their land, eventually all Indians that desire land will acquire it at some point. Collier says that the bill “strikes a double blow at the two fatal weaknesses of Indian administration across a whole century: first, the dissipation of the Indian estate and the progressive pauperization of the Indians, and, second, the suppression of Indian tribal and social and religious institutions and the steadfast failure of the Government to organize any effective plan of collective action by which the Indians could advance in citizenship and protect their rights.”¹¹

Of the new policies passed by the IRA, the most successful was the recognition of tribal governments and allowing tribes to self-govern. The IRA encouraged tribes to create their own Constitutions, giving tribes freedom they never had before. Prior to the IRA, Native Americans were encouraged to assimilate into American and European culture. This had been the case since the beginning discoveries of Native Americans.¹² FDR said while trying to pass the act, “We can and should, without delay, extend to the Indian the fundamental rights of political liberty and local self-government and the opportunities of education and economic assistance that they require in order to attain a wholesome American life.”¹³ While FDR is accredited for this advantageous act, a lot of the credit is also given to John Collier. Because of the success from the act, as well as the timing, it is often noted as the Indian New Deal.

The Indian Reorganization Act, while having major impact on Indian reform, was often seen as not enough. It was an “effort on the part of Congress to protect, preserve, and support tribal art, culture, and public and social organization.”¹⁴ This act ended the allotment policy previously established by the federal government, and allowed Indian land to be returned to its rightful tribes

¹¹ ""A Bill of Rights for the Indians": John Collier Envisions an Indian New Deal." HISTORY MATTERS - The U.S. Survey Course on the Web. Accessed May 10, 2018.

¹² Kratz, Jessie. "Indian New Deal." The National Archives Pieces of History. November 30, 2015. Accessed May 10, 2018.

¹³ Trafzer, 154.

¹⁴ Wilkins, 119.

or new reservations to be created. While this was a major change for American Indians, the IRA gave Indian reservations the ability to establish their own constitutions and bylaws. This was supposed to be significant for American Indians, but FDR still required these reservations to approve their constitutions by the federal government. This went directly against what Collier had hoped for, as he wanted to minimize the impact of the federal government.¹⁵

This act received mixed reviews from the Native population. It helped to reduce the amount of land lost by Indians, but it did not succeed in allowing American Indians to be a self-preserving reservation. By dictating the government of the tribes, it made it more difficult for American Indians to have a successful reservation.¹⁶ Many tribes embraced this act, having 164 Native communities organizing under this act. The government, however, was surprised to learn that ninety-four Native communities denied the reorganization. They were quite skeptical of American government and felt as though this act was trying to implement the American style of government on their tribes. After rejection from many tribes, as well as less support from Congress, the act proved to be less impactful than they had previously anticipated. Less money was allocated to Indians, and Congress continued to deny the New Deal Indian policy that would allow for Indians to become American citizens. This was one of Hoover's main goals, and was not introduced again until Truman was elected.¹⁷ While this act is seen as an important step in Indian reformation, it had many negative side effects as well.

Because of this emphasis put on American Indians and how to change federal policy, many historians believe that John Collier and FDR were the most important figures in making change for American Indians. While Collier's legacy focuses on the Indian Reorganization Act, there were also a variety of other things that Collier did to enhance the rights of American Indians. Collier also worked to protect the religious freedom of American Indians. Collier made sure they were protected under FDR's relief programs, he created an Arts and Crafts Board, he ordered codification of Indian law, and he used social scientists during his time who respected native Indian culture.¹⁸ The Arts and Craft Board was set up to "promote, encourage, and revive, native arts and crafts." This was necessary, as often American Indians felt neglected in being able to showcase

¹⁵ Wilkins.

¹⁶ Wilkins.

¹⁷ Trafzer, 156-157.

¹⁸ Philip, 244.

their art.¹⁹ Since art is a large part of Indian culture, this was a huge success for Collier. Additionally, one of Collier's other major achievements was also working to create the Indian Emergency Work Program. This program worked to rebuild the eroded lands on several reservations. This was significant, as erosion of these lands destroyed many of the religious sanctuaries for American Indians. The restoration of this land provided a spiritual place for these American Indians, something they greatly desired.²⁰ Because of his emphasis on American Indians and their desire for change, many scholars believe he made the largest impact on American Indians. One scholar writes, "Collier will always be remembered as a mover and shaker of Indian history during his twelve years as commissioner. Because he had a poetic insight into the grandeur of Indian culture, Collier encouraged a sense of personal dignity and self-respect among many Indians...it would have pleased Collier, who devoted his long life to the Indians' cause, to know that some of the ideas he favored were still having an impact on history."²¹

Overall, FDR and Collier were seen as pivotal figures in advancing change for Native Americans. The IRA worked to end the notion of assimilating Native Americans into the American culture, but also encouraged them to continue their tribes as well as their historic culture. This act also led more legislation and is seen as the stepping stone for legislation on American Indians to be passed.²² While important, it is often overlooked that both FDR and Collier, as well as the IRA, were made possible because of the policies and outlook on Indians put in place by Hoover. Despite the great change made by FDR and Collier, it is evident that Hoover was this driving force.

Background on Hoover and his Indian Affiliations

Hoover, having a special interest in American Indians, spent a great deal of his life focusing on and understanding the complexities of this population. He spent much of his life living with and spending time with American Indians. This comprehensive background of Indian lifestyle made it easier for Hoover to transition into enacting federal policy for American Indians. By having this background, Hoover allowed himself to be better prepared to help American Indians, and it put him at a significant advantage in understanding Indians.

¹⁹ "Indian Arts and Crafts Board." Encyclopædia Britannica. Accessed May 10, 2018.

²⁰ Philip, 243.

²¹ Philip, 244.

²² "Which U.S. Presidents Have Been the Most Helpful to Native Americans?" Quora. Accessed May 10, 2018.

Herbert Hoover spent much of his life devoted to helping Indians, due to his background in Indian affairs. Herbert Hoover was born in West Branch, Iowa, but soon after his father died, he moved to an Indian reservation in Oklahoma. He was six years old at the time and stayed at the Osage Nation for eight years.²³ The Osage Nation has a rich history, as it has been an active tribe since before 1200. The Osage Nation, at one time, dominated large portions of Missouri, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Kansas. The Osage Nation has had close relation to the United States as well, specifically after the Louisiana Purchase.²⁴ Hoover's mother, Hulda Hoover, was a Quaker minister and taught Hoover many of his basic moral and ethical values. She instilled the Quaker ideals in Hoover, leading him to bring these ideals into his presidency. These ideals include honesty, simplicity, diligence, and generosity.²⁵

Hoover's uncle, in order to help Hoover's mother, thought it would be the best following the father's passing to bring Hoover to this Indian reservation. Hoover's uncle, Major Laban Miles, was an Indian Agent²⁶ at Osage Nation.²⁷ Indian agents had unlimited power in the tribes, making Hoover's uncle a key figure to look up to. In Hoover's memoir, he focuses on this time period as one of much learning about Indians tribes. He learned how to hunt for rabbits and other food from the other Indian boys, he learned about the woods and the streams, and he learned how to make bows and arrows. He says, "Here with cousins of my own age, I had constant association with the little Indians at the agency school. We learned much aboriginal lore of the woods and streams, and how to make bows and arrows."²⁸ Additionally, Hoover went to Indian Sunday school, which was taught in English. This added to Hoover's knowledge of Indian nations and made him feel more of a part of their tribe.²⁹

As Hoover grew up, he moved to Sioux County, Iowa, and attended mainstream American school. Soon after, Hoover's mother died, and Hoover was taken away by his uncle. Hoover's uncle had him begin learning how to farm, which Hoover recalls as very difficult. During this

²³ "Herbert Hoover: Only US President to Have Lived on Indian Reservation." Indian Country Media Network. August 02, 2016. Accessed May 10, 2018.

²⁴ Burns, Louis F. *A history of the Osage people*. University of Alabama Press, 2004. 148.

²⁵ Trafzer, 147.

²⁶ Indian agents are defined as "BIA administrative personnel who historically had served as diplomatic liaisons between tribal nations and the United States, eventually became the key figures in charge of acculturating and fostering the assimilation of Indians."

²⁷ Hoover, Herbert. 1951. *The memoirs of Herbert Hoover*. New York: MacMillan Co.

²⁸ Hoover, 4.

²⁹ Hoover, 10.

difficult time period for Hoover, he became very attached to the Quaker religion. He focused on the Quaker religion because it taught him training in patience, despite his tough life in Iowa. After some time in Iowa, Hoover decided to work closely with his doctor. Dr. Minthorn, who was an Indian Agent prior to becoming a doctor, lived in a Quaker settlement valley. Hoover worked with him in order to become closer to the Quaker religion, which helped him understand it more deeply.³⁰

After many years of living with both the Indian nations as well as the Quaker religion, Hoover moved back in with his brother and his cousin. His cousin was the daughter of Major Laban Miles, the uncle whom Hoover lived with at the Osage Nation. Hoover's cousin would continue to tell him stories about living on the Indian reservation. He says, "My cousin Harriet Miles, with whose father I had lived in Indian Territory, came to us to look after our household. She was one of the most sterling women ever born—with a wealth of Indian dialect stories."³¹ This enhanced his understanding of the Indian tribes as well as helped him reminisce on his times living at the Osage Nation.³² While living with his cousin in Berkeley, he swiftly became interested in engineering. This ultimately led Hoover to his interest in politics and government through a variety of engineering jobs and schooling. Soon after, Hoover registered to vote as a Republican for the first time.

It is clear that prior to his interest in politics, Hoover was especially interested in learning about and becoming closer with American Indians. He spent much of his young life either living with Indians, or learning about them. Hoover's background in Indian affairs became a key point of legislative interest. Hoover was the only United States president that lived on an Indian reservation, which helped to bridge the gap between Indian assimilation and Indian self-determination. Bringing this extensive background on American Indians into office was the first of many important steps in beginning to make change for American Indians.

The Meriam Report and its Significance

In 1928, Lewis Meriam, along with nine other scholars, framed Indian policy in a brand-new way. They released "The Problem of Indian Administration", more commonly known as the

³⁰ Hoover, 15.

³¹ Hoover, 26.

³² Hoover, 29.

Meriam Report. This Report worked to explain the “deplorable” conditions of Indian reservations and released a series of recommendations to Congress. Lewis Meriam gathered a team of specialists and conducted a three-year survey to investigate Indian affairs. They did seven months-worth of field work, giving them a thorough investigation. It gathered information from twenty-three states, with more than 1,000 Native American inhabitants. They also visited ninety-five reservations, agencies, hospitals, and schools. The report had eight sections, including “A General Policy for Indian Affairs,” “Health,” “Education,” “General Economic Conditions,” “Family and Community Life & the Activities of Women,” “The Migrated Indians,” “The Legal Aspects of the Indian Problem,” and “The Missionary Activities among the Indians.” Each section was done by a specialist in that field.³³ These recommendations discussed land allotment, education, and the general welfare of American Indians. It also called for Congress to obtain more money for American Indians, as well as reorganize the Office of Indian Affairs.³⁴ The Meriam Report was also known as the first comprehensive report on federal policies impacting American Indians. This was the first report that outlined what federal policies were currently in place and what policies needed to be changed.³⁵

The findings of the report were very extensive and touched upon in a variety of aspects. The three most important themes from the report were health, economy, and education. The report notes the poor state of the hospitals for Native American reservations. It says, “The hospitals, sanatoria, and sanatorium schools maintained by the [Indian Health] Service, despite a few exceptions, must generally be characterized as lacking in personnel, equipment, management, and design” (Meriam, 9). The hospitals also did not provide effective care for the Indian patients. The second most important theme was the theme of the economy. The report concluded that the general income of an Indian family is much lower than it should be, and that this could have resulted from the previous allotment policy.

The report also mentions that while the loss of land was one factor in the poverty, but the land that was left for the Indians was not suitable for agriculture, making it difficult for the Indians to farm and make money. The report says that, “Little attempt has been made to formulate a broad constructive program for the service as a whole, extending over a long term of years, and having

³³ Starnes, Bobby Ann. “What we don’t know can hurt them: White teachers, Indian children.” *Phi Delta Kappan* 87, no. 5 (2006): 384-392.

³⁴ Trafzer, 146.

³⁵ Starnes.

for its goal the general improvement of economic conditions” (Meriam, 5). Lastly, the report discusses education. They emphasize the need for Indians to be educated amongst other children and not in separate institutions as they had been previously. The Meriam Report criticized many of the boarding schools, saying that they did not provide adequate food or medical services, were overcrowded, and did not care about teacher performance. Overall, these three aspects of the Meriam Report were talked about for many years to come.

The Meriam report had many immediate results because Hoover immediately came into office and enacted some of the policies. The most important effect of the Meriam Report was its criticism of the land allotment policy. This policy resulted in the loss of most Indian reservations, as well as severely disrupted their economy. The Meriam Report criticized this act and explained the immediate harms of this act. One scholar says, "The immediate result of the report's attack on [land] allotment was a decline in the issuance of allotted lands. In the four fiscal years prior to the initiation of the study, 1922–1926, approximately 10,000 Native Americans were allotted over 3 million acres from their Reservations. In comparison, during the fiscal years 1929-1932, the 4 years immediately following the publication of 'The Problem of Indian Administration,' a little over 2,800 Native Americans were allotted less than 500,000 acres."³⁶ This ultimately led to the Indian Reorganization Act, which reversed the Dawes Act. Hoover, however, was the first president to analyze the Meriam Report and begin implementing its suggestions.

Hoover and his Policy Changes for Indians: Background on Hoover Presidency

After graduating from Stanford, Hoover moved to China and began his work as a lead engineer. He spent much of his life being an engineer until he began his work as a humanitarian. While in China, he directed barricades and even spent time rescuing Chinese children. While in London, Hoover was asked to be on a committee that helped bring American troops back home. He worked on this committee, helping to bring back 120,000 American troops. After doing a few humanitarian projects, Hoover found a love in helping others and began a project feeding children in Belgium.

Being a humanitarian, Hoover was then appointed under President Wilson as the head of the Food Administration. Hoover was able to cut the costs and rationing of food, while also making

³⁶ Holm, Tom. *The Great Confusion in Indian Affairs: Native Americans and Whites in the Progressive Era*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007.

sure everyone was fed. He then worked to make sure that central Europe had enough food, once stating “Twenty million people are starving. Whatever their politics, they shall be fed!” After this Hoover worked as the Secretary of Commerce under President Coolidge. He then realized he wanted to do more to serve, and he ran as the next Republican nominee for President of the United States.³⁷

Herbert Hoover served as the United States president from 1929-1933. Hoover was a Republican, promising peace and prosperity within the nation. Hoover came into office right as the Great Depression began and focused on reforming economic policies. While Hoover was not the single cause of the Great Depression, many attribute the difficult period to Hoover, as he did not do “enough” to support the American people. This ultimately led to the loss of Hoover after one term, where he was beaten by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.³⁸

Given his background in Indian reservations, Hoover had a particular interest in Indian reformation. This interest stemmed from both his background as a Quaker, as well as living on the Osage Nation. He believed that there has always been a problem with Indians since the early arrival of American colonists. Hoover says, “The American Indian has been a problem ever since white men landed at Jamestown. That problem is a mixture of national conscience, of agriculture, education, health, poverty, shiftlessness, and ideology.”³⁹ While many federal officials believe that this problem can be fixed with compensation for their land and American civilization, Hoover believes that the solution is much different than that.

Historically speaking, Hoover identified specific points and concerns. He wrote about how white men sold liquor to Indians in violation of the law, married the young Indians in order to get their oil rights and land inheritances, or made up claims to push through Congress so they could make some profit. Hoover thought these historical disadvantages for the Indians made them worthy of more attention today. Hoover mentions that every president must devote a certain amount of time per week to “Indian Affairs.” He says in his memoir, “Certainly, our 400,000 Indians consume more official attention than any twenty cities of 400,000 white people.”⁴⁰ Additionally, Hoover mentions that many previous federal policies worked to assimilate tribes and make the Indians a

³⁷ "Herbert Hoover." The White House. Accessed May 10, 2018.

³⁸ History.com Staff. "Herbert Hoover." History.com. 2009. Accessed May 10, 2018.

³⁹ Hoover, 317.

⁴⁰ Hoover, 318.

part of the general population. He instead thought Indians should be thought of differently and considered himself a part of the “fusion” school of thought.

While Hoover was in the White House, he spent much of his time honoring and respecting American Indians. One scholar says, “During Hoover’s presidency, Osages visited him at the White House, posing for photographs in full Indian regalia- a symbol of honor and respect.”⁴¹ This sign of respect and honor given to the American Indians reflects Hoover’s overall ambition of creating self-determination for the Indians. It was also evident that the Indians honored and respected Hoover.

Despite the Meriam Report being just prior to Hoover becoming president, there were also a variety of other reports and studies that helped begin Indian reform. These reports included the Preston-Engle Report, a “Law and Order on Indian Reservations of the Northwest,” and more. The Preston-Engle Report focused on Indian irrigation and how to make them a more sustainable community, while the Law and Order on Indian Reservation of the Northwest was a study on Indian agricultural land. Also, during Hoover’s first few years, he began a subcommittee of the Senate Indian Committee. The Senate Indian Committee was created under the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) management, and its purpose was to analyze the difficulties of Indian affairs and propose legislation that would help with those difficulties. This committee did a report entitled “An Economic Survey of the Range Resources and Grazing Activities on Indian Reservation.” This report was a longitudinal study that showed senators how their policies actually affected American Indians. This report “gave senators personal experience with the depth of Indian poverty caused by their own government’s policies...”⁴² These reports were known to be equally as important as the Meriam Report, as it provided the groundwork for future officials to promote Indian self-preservation. While many believe that FDR and Collier were the ones to promote Indian reform based on their policies, it was Hoover’s administration that advanced the reports that allowed for any policy changes.

Policies and Changes Enacted by Hoover

Prior to Hoover being in office, there had been a tone set for American Indians by previous governmental institutions. Many government officials worked to assimilate Indians into American

⁴¹ Trafzer, 148.

⁴² Wilkins, 119.

culture, going as far as sending children to American boarding schools to learn about American culture and skills. This pressing concern for Indian culture was one of Hoover's primary concerns as well. He expresses early on that federal Indian policy focuses on assimilation rather than self-determination, something he wanted to change. His main priority for Indian Affairs during his presidency was to ensure the citizenship of the American Indians. Hoover also often publicly denounced the allotment act, and the mass amount of land taken away from American Indians. Not only did Hoover appoint many individuals to promote equal treatment of Indians, he also had the first American Indian Vice President, Charles Curtis. Curtis was a descendant of Kaw and Osage Indians and was still currently a member of the Kaw tribal community. Curtis was an advocate of Indian citizenship and self-determination.⁴³

While in office, Hoover did a variety of things to promote Indian self-determination, as well as work for the well-being of the population. One of the first things Hoover did while in office was appoint Charles J. Rhoads as the commissioner of Indian Affairs. Rhoads was a Quaker, philanthropist, and the president of the Indian Rights Association. Rhoads also had a particular interest in respecting Indian lands and treaty rights.⁴⁴ Rhoads was chosen based on the recommendations made from the Indian Rights Association. The Indian Rights Association wanted a commissioner who would carry out the proposals of the Meriam Report, and Hoover took this consideration clearly. Because of Hoover's emphasis on self-determination for the Indians, as well as the Meriam Report emphasis on the same thing, he knew the commissioner needed to uphold these ideals.⁴⁵ Hoover also appointed Henry Scattergood to work with Rhoads as commissioner. Both Rhoads and Scattergood were Quakers, as Hoover believed that Quakers have always been defenders of Indians throughout American history. Hoover wanted this newly appointed Bureau to emphasize the needs of American Indians. Hoover says, "They reported that the objective of the administration must be to make the Indians self-supporting and self-respecting. They were to be viewed no longer as wards of the nation, but as potential citizens."⁴⁶

On January 3, 1930, President Herbert Hoover made a statement on Indian affairs. In this statement, he outlines the many things he wanted his administration to cover while in office. He began by announcing that he will be appointing the new head of the Indian Bureau, Charles

⁴³ Trafzer, 146-149.

⁴⁴ Trafzer, 148.

⁴⁵ Philip, 93.

⁴⁶ Hoover, 318.

Rhoads. Following that, he began to explain why Congress needed to allocate more money to Indian affairs. He says this is important for their education and health facilities, as well as to develop industrial improvement. He also mentions his desire for American Indians to become self-determined. He says, "The broad problem is to better train the Indian youth to take care of themselves and their property. It is the only course by which we can ultimately discharge this problem from the Nation, and blend them as a self-supporting people into the Nation as a whole."⁴⁷

Hoover worked to gather a variety of laws and regulations in place to help the American Indians. He was quickly able to gather an additional \$3,000,000 from Congress to finance programs that worked towards Indian self-determination. Also, Congress amended many laws that governed the Indians and their property. It better protected them from exploitation, as well as improved health and educational services. Hoover increased the funding for Indian health care and education, as well as provide training to the Indian youth. This time period emphasized the importance of Indians focusing on self-determination and self-governance.

In addition to Hoover advocating for money for American Indians, he also focused on passing acts that would benefit the American Indians. After Hoover spent a great deal of time pushing Congress to pass legislation for American Indians, they finally decided to pass a law regarding land. In February of 1931, Hoover vetoed the "fair and just compensation" bill. This bill would give the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cheyenne, and Arapaho nations "fair and just compensation" for the land ceded to them by the United States in the 19th century. While this bill had the hopes of helping American Indians, Hoover viewed it as not enough. In his veto message, he says, "the value of such lands ha(d) obviously increased during the last 150 years" and the government could not "undertake revision of such treaties," especially given what had happened to American Indians the past few years. The next year, Congress passed the Leavitt Act. This act got rid of all outstanding debts "in such a way as shall be equitable and just in consideration of all the circumstances under which such charges were made." This act removed millions of dollars of debt from American Indians.⁴⁸

The Hoover administration worked to uphold the ideas from the Meriam Report. The administration increased appropriations to improve the health and diet of young Indians, creating

⁴⁷ "Herbert Hoover: Statement on Indian Affairs. - January 3, 1930." The American Presidency Project. Accessed May 10, 2018.

⁴⁸ "Herbert Hoover: Only US President to Have Lived on Indian Reservation."

new positions in health and education, as well as constructing more Indian day schools and restoring Indian service buildings. At this time, Collier also had sent many recommendations for legislation, all of which were endorsed by the Hoover administration. As previously noted, Collier spent much of his adult life working to better the lives of American Indians. Collier assumed that by sending ideas to Hoover, he could get some of his ideas into the current administration. The ideas Hoover followed through with included The Arts and Crafts Board, a bill focusing on the general welfare of Indians, and he worked to phase out Indian boarding schools. Additionally, Collier proposed many ideas similar to the Indian Reorganization Act, including the end of the land allotment act and the creation of a court system to reimburse Indian losses. Despite Hoover's presidency being during the Great Depression, he was able to gain an additional \$13 million to the welfare of Indians. He spent a great deal of this money on direct relief to Indian education and health. Additionally, Hoover had Rhoads set up a reform package that helped to close down many of the unpopular reservation boarding schools and improved health care facilities.

The Hoover administration worked tirelessly to adhere to the recommendations made by the Meriam Report. One of the first recommendations that was implemented was the reorganization of the Indian Bureau. This divided the bureau into five divisions: health, education, agricultural extension, forestry, and irrigation. Each division had its own director so that they could work directly with the White House. While President Hoover wanted many of these changes, there was much difficulty in getting these all through Congress. Louis C. Cramton, chairman of the House of Appropriations Subcommittee, often gave Hoover a difficult time in trying to advance policies to help American Indians. For example, President Hoover tried to implement a change from the Meriam Report, in which the government would increase the food allowance for Indians from 20 to 37.8 cents a day, and the clothing allowance from \$22 to \$42 a day. Cramton quickly responded that he would "not allow himself to be stampeded by talk of starving children."⁴⁹ As Hoover was president during the aftermath of the Great Depression, it was difficult for him to focus many of his attentions on the American Indians. He did have some members of Congress who backed his ideals, but this was not enough to pass any major legislation for American Indians. He did, however, make it abundantly clear that there was a need for self-determination, and that the government should be adhering to the policies of the Meriam Report.

⁴⁹ Philip, 98.

When leaving office, Hoover knew that he had not solved the many difficulties of American Indians. He did, however, understand the importance of self-determination moving forward for American Indians. Hoover says, “They were on the way toward wider citizenship and self-support when the believers in the communal pole of thought came in with the New Deal. The Indian problem is still with us, and presidents are still vetoing phony claim bills.”⁵⁰ Hoover quickly became the first president to care deeply about the self-determination and self-governance of American Indians. Without Hoover setting the tone for American Indians in the United States, the success of FDR and Collier would not have been nearly as prevalent. Trafzer, an American Indian scholar, says, “The new commitment to self-determination...laid the foundation for Indian policy for the remainder of the twentieth century and continues to shape the relationship between Indian nations and the presidents in our time.”⁵¹ Prior to Hoover, the nation lacked the general respect and understanding for American Indians. This presidency was essential in paving the way for self-determination of all American Indians.

Conclusion

As shown through extensive information, it is clear that President Herbert Hoover was the initial force to make substantial change for American Indians. With his emphasis on self-determination, as well as his hopes and actions for acquiring more money for the federal services to tribes, he made a lasting impact. Prior to Hoover’s inauguration, many federal officials viewed American Indians as a population that needed to be assimilated. Also, officials created policies that inhibited the growth of reservations as well as the well-being of many American Indians. While this became evident to future policy makers, many assumed that Collier and FDR were the first that began the change for American Indians. This is often thought to be true, as this was the team that enacted the Indian Reorganization Act in 1934. This act removed the previous land allotment policy, which became a huge win for American Indians. This, however, was not the first important change in federal policy. The first was Hoover’s adamant switch to self-determination. Hoover was the first president to have lived on an Indian reservation, and he brought this background with him into office. He had grown up learning about the American Indians, so he was well suited to advocate for their rights. Hoover came into office immediately, following the

⁵⁰ Hoover, 319.

⁵¹ Trafzer, 146.

publication of the Meriam Report, a 900-page investigation recommending changes for American Indians from Congress. Hoover was quick to enact many of these changes, including allocating more money for American Indians, reorganizing the Bureau, as well as getting better educational and health facilities for the reservations. These were important changes, but the most important change Hoover made was his adherence to self-determination of the Indians. Without this advocacy from federal office, many officials following would have never emphasized this dire change, including FDR. Hoover was one of the many individuals that helped pave a new pathway for American Indians, and his credit is rightly deserved.

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